

World-first conference on animal disaster management

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The Global Animal Disaster Management Conference was conducted over 10 days in February 2021. It was a world-first of its type and kind in a pandemic-affected global environment, but its 4 volunteer conference organisers had the motivation, connections and skills to pull it off.

Have you ever had one of those too-good-to-miss opportunities turn up at the worst possible time? In August 2020, in the middle of a busy teaching semester and in a pandemic-disrupted academic research year I received an invitation to join a group in early planning for an international conference. Normally, I might have turned this volunteering down, but it was no normal year and when I learnt that the conference would be focused on a passion of mine - animal emergency management - and the small organising team comprised 2 friends (Steve Glassey, ex-Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Inc. in New Zealand and Christine Belcher, Managing Editor of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*) I knew I had to jump in with both feet.

Steve and Christine had been discussing ideas for a themed edition of AJEM related to animals in emergencies and Steve had the idea to host a conference to focus interest in the area. The team was later joined by Gerardo Huertas, someone I only knew by reputation as the World Animal Protection Director of Disaster Management, based in Costa Rica.

The brief: an international conference, fully virtual, spread across time zones, and free. One of the good things to come out of the pandemic is how we have embraced online exchanges of information, whether that's webinars, Zoom meetings or virtual conferences. An international conference where you don't have to travel, find funds or get permissions to attend opens up a world of knowledge-exchange opportunities. So began the development of a conference that had the potential to be fully open and inclusive to people with an interest in animal emergency management right around the globe.

First was to decide a fitting conference title. As it was the inaugural conference, we had a blank slate but finally agreed on the Global Animal Disaster Management Conference (GADMC). Next, we sketched out a good conference program with a strong start. This is where fortune favours the brave. Steve approached one of the biggest names in animals and disasters, Professor Leslie Irvine from the University of Colorado in Boulder, and she agreed to deliver the opening keynote address. For those less familiar with animal emergency management, Professor Irvine is a sociologist, known for her work in animal welfare in disasters and her work after Hurricane Katrina in the US. She is the author of an acclaimed book about animal welfare and ethics in disasters, *Filling the Ark*. Her written work and advocacy have influenced many to pursue research in this area.

We then set about announcing the conference to colleagues and luminaries in the field to recruit speakers. All this went hand-in-hand with the background work of setting up a website, registering with a conference hosting site and establishing processes to manage sponsorship funds. This was all handled by Steve and Animal Evac New Zealand. The call for abstracts went out in early November and when this call closed, just before Christmas, we had received more than 50 excellent presentation outlines from people in every continent of the world (except Antarctica.).

At this point, with the conference date set for mid-February 2021, the clock was ticking.

Christine was busy interacting with speakers about potential submissions to the journal and Steve was working on opening the conference for delegate registrations. Within a few days of opening registrations, the online conference

hosting platform company closed down without warning. Steve managed to source and transfer information to enable delegates to register.

Just as the conference had been a success with speakers, it was also very well supported by sponsors. The goal was to make the conference as accessible as possible and this was achieved with the support of sponsors that allowed the conference to run for free to delegates. World Animal Protection came on as primary platinum sponsor and the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, International Fund for Animal Welfare, Reach and Rescue, American Veterinary Medical Foundation, the C4 Group and Central Queensland University (CQU) were gold sponsors. We had initially hoped for a hundred or so delegates but as registrations rolled in, we were faced with many hundreds and growing. This was turning into a very large international conference.

Steve had recently been appointed as Director of the new Emergency Response Innovation Centre at CQU in Townsville. This meant that in the final throes of conference organisation, Steve was migrating to another country, in the middle of a pandemic, to take up a significant new role with CQU. But that was not the only challenge. Gerardo finished up his position with World Animal Protection, Christine broke her leg and underwent surgery and time in hospital, and I took voluntary redundancy from Macquarie University, which took effect mid-conference.

However, Steve's move to CQU meant the conference was well supported technically, with CQU hosting the conference using their Zoom platform and, critically, their amazing and calm IT team fielding our increasingly frantic queries.

The conference ran from 15 February to 24 February over 10 consecutive days, including the weekend. The conference was structured as a series of individual presentations, hosted as Zoom webinars. The sessions were based on Australian Eastern Standard Time, from 0800 to 2000 with 4 to 6 presentations a day. By the time the conference began, 1100 people had registered with final registrations over 1500.

Over the 10 days of the conference there were 44 regular speaker presentations of around 30-40 minutes (with questions) plus the conference keynote and an online social event. For the social event, we conducted the GADMC trivia championship, which was won by the 'Five Continents Rescue Team' named as such as members came from 5 different continents.

During the conference we gained a good appreciation of the diversity of the field. There were presentations from veterinarians, government officials and policy makers, academics from many disciplines, emergency management experts, industry associations and stakeholders, international non-government organisations, social workers, communications experts, legal experts and community volunteers.

It is difficult to summarise such diverse content. However, from Australia, we heard about responses to the Black Summer bushfires and the work underway to improve consideration of, and response to, bushfires and we discussed the legal status of animals. From India and South East Asia, we heard about the

significance of livestock to vulnerable communities and the work undertaken with communities to prepare for disaster events and protect animals. From the US, we heard about innovations and preparations for managing mass livestock disposal after disasters and emergency diseases as well as preparedness activities and training for people managing captive exotic animals in zoos and aquariums. From Canada, we learnt about livestock emergency response and from Japan, we heard about the impacts of the Fukushima disaster and mass evacuation on the owners of companion animals. Technical animal rescue was the subject of a number of presentations with New Zealand, the US and the UK providing case studies, approaches and training for large animal rescue. One of the most moving presentations was provided by Dr Jackson Zee from Four Paws International who detailed the challenges in rescuing live export sheep from the *Queen Hind* livestock carrier when it capsized in waters off Romania. Dr Zee outlined the technical rescue challenges, the political aspects of negotiating rescue and the mental health effects for responders.

In summary, we had a great program of speakers and a great uptake from delegates. Being both online and free, we didn't expect everyone to log in for all sessions and perhaps some registered to get the recordings later on, which is fine. However, there was good attendance at all sessions and some great questions from attendees. Did the technology behave? Most of the time, yes – but there were issues. Was it a stressful experience? Yes. Were there challenges for delegates around time zones? Yes, occasionally. Did the lack of physical social interactions with others seem odd? Yes, it wasn't the same as a face-to-face conference, but it was still darn good. Would we do it again? Absolutely!

We gathered session evaluation data as we went along and were buoyed at the positive and supportive responses, which still flowed in the weeks after the event. We knew there were things to improve on and the 2021 experience sets us up well for 2022.

This was a free conference. Our supporting sponsors are partners in this area. Presenters volunteered to share experiences and ways of working and delegates could pick and choose sessions – for free. Sessions will be edited and made available late in July 2021 to coincide with the AJEM July edition and the online GADMC awards ceremony.

You can view the conference program, register to be notified when the recordings are available and receive updates on plans for GADMC 2020 at:
www.gadmc.org/schedule.